

# Examining the importance of liberal feminism



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" As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."-Virginia Woolf (Kolmar and Bartkowski 136)

What is feminism? What are the differences in feminist belief? Do all feminists share the same ideals and objectives? Can the various feminist ideologies really be that different? These are some of the questions one might ask oneself when taking a deeper look into the diverse and sometimes complicated spectrum of feminist ideology. In attempt to clarify, building from the bottom upward develops a stronger understanding of the topic at hand and brings forth the ability to criticize and analyze in a more credible fashion. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, feminism is " the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes; organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests." (m-w. com) Feminist theory stems from the theory that women's knowledge is misrepresented in government agencies, universities, businesses, and even the arts. Taking into consideration the nature of " theory," one can then render the assumption that people or groups can then build upon that theory, adding their own beliefs, issues of interest, and opinions to create a more distilled ideology.

Comprehending these concepts leads to the identification of some of the most mainstream feminist ideologies. These ideologies flow alongside the history of feminism itself (often emerging from waves and movements), and are studied and embraced by identifying feminists and scholars alike.

Chronologically, liberal feminism appeared first in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Liberal feminists argue that men and women differ very little biologically, but are socially constructed to learn gender. Once learning

what it means to be masculine or feminine, we perform this and accept it as identity. The two primary sources of gender inequality lie in the division of labor and gender socialization of children, according to liberal feminists. Their main political concerns are equality in the workplace, economic equality, equal representation in government affairs, and rights to procreative choice. The 1970s also saw the expansion of what has become a huge branch of feminism. Commonly associated with man-hating and family-hating dyke lesbians, radical feminism supports the idea of motherhood being supreme to thinking and behavior. Radical feminists argue that patriarchy is the systemic oppression of women by men, and the core reasoning to the significant violence enacted upon women. By definition, oppression is not just discrimination but a cruel or violent exercise of power. Radicals believe that through violence (rape, harassment, battering, murder, sexual exploitation) men keep their control over women. Their political agenda includes sexual harassment laws, rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters, and anti-pornography campaigns. Another popular feminist ideology that took rise during the 1980s is socialist feminism. Socialist feminism focuses on the fundamental problem that women are economically dependent on men, and common "women's" professions (such as childcare and teaching) are underrepresented in salaries. These feminists also support the idea of a redistribution of responsibilities and work in the family sphere. Some of their political ideas include government aid in home care and increased economic opportunities for women and disadvantaged men. The last, most recent ideology that has made a huge impact on feminism is intersectional/multicultural feminism. The idea behind this category of feminism is that we cannot possibly achieve gender justice

without addressing the way other injustices play into women's injustice. They support the notion that the intersectionality of gender, racial categories, ethnicity, social class, and economic class is ever present, and one cannot look at any social oppression without considering another. Thus, they feel that this entire matrix of domination must be challenged. This handful of popular feminist ideologies are just a very few of the many, many more that exist.

After summarizing these most prevalent feminist theories, I feel the single sub-type under the feminist ideological umbrella that appeals to most women as a populous, and carries the strongest, most active argument is liberal feminism. The ultimate goal of liberal feminism in the United States is embodied in the Equal Rights Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. It reads, " Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex." (United States 1) Building upon the ideas discussed earlier, liberal feminism demands equality lawfully (as stated under law), socially, economically, in education, and in the home. Liberal feminist's works within the gendered social system in order to diminish it of its discriminatory effects on women. This goal is termed undoing gender, or reversing the effects of gendered discrimination. Looking further into the ideas of gender inequality under a liberal feminist perspective, the division of labor is a predominant issue. Liberal feminists point out that homecare and childcare are a woman's primary responsibility, in some instances, even above her own well-being. " The mindscapes that legitimate women's segregation are the cognitive translations of ideologies that range the spectrum from radical fundamentalism to difference

feminism; all are grounded in cultural-religious or pseudoscientific views that women have different emotions, brains, aptitudes, ways of thinking, conversing, and imagining. Such mindsets are legitimated every day in conventional understandings expressed from the media, pulpits, boardrooms, and in departments of universities. Psychologists call them schemas (Brewer and Nakamura 1984)-culturally set definitions that people internalize. Gender operates as a cultural 'superschema' (Roos and Gatta 2006) that shapes interaction and cues stereotypes (Ridgeway 1997). Schemas that define femaleness and maleness are basic to all societies." (Fuchs Epstein 16) Accounting for all of the variances between men and women that society embraces, Epstein proposes that the idea of gender correlating to psychological schemas internalized. Liberal feminism denounces the idea that men and women are physically, emotionally, and intellectually polar opposites. This also builds off of the liberal ideal that men and women should share household duties and childcare. They support the idea that being good at cleaning kitchens or nurturing a child is something learned, not a biological instinct. Feminists also have trouble overcoming the kind of work men undertake. Men oftentimes help around the house, but it mostly consists of boundary help, where there's a beginning and an end (dishes, mowing the lawn, taking out the trash) or work that can be publicly recognized and gratified (yard work). The fact that schemas, even associated with everyday life tasks, is oftentimes still deemed to be true just propels patriarchy.

Continuing upon issues in the household, liberal theory really sets a standard of what it means to be socially constructed as male or female. It argues that

individuals learn to have feminine qualities if determined female at birth, and masculine qualities if biologically male. Just by looking at the toy section at a local Target, children's toys are segregated by blue and pink isles. Girls should play with Barbie, wear pink and bright colors, and if they get sad it's okay to cry because they are fragile and emotional. Boys should play with toy trucks, wear blue and dark colors, and if they get sad don't show it because that's weakness and you don't want to be called a little girl. Instead, repress your feelings and get angry and violent in other ways to show your dominance. Liberal feminists say that this is all socially constructed; men and women are alike in more ways than not, and we must stop this cycle of gender normatively in order to reverse gender oppression.

Moving out of the household and into the world, more issues arise around women in the workforce. Not only do feminists call for equal pay and equal opportunity for employment amidst their male peers, but they also cry for an end to gatekeeping and breaking through the glass ceiling. " The concept of gatekeeping explains how most women are kept from getting to the top in occupations and professions dominated by men. Gatekeeping used to keep women out of those fields entirely. Now gatekeeping keeps women out of the line for promotion to top positions." (Lorber 34) This happening reveals the devaluation of and low pay for women's jobs, and women in general.

Business have to comply with guidelines about diversifying the workplace, but still keep discriminatory practices alive when it comes to positions of power and money. Although home life shows so much discriminatory practices, the world on the outside doesn't offer much promise either.

The final problem of high priority to liberal feminism is the limitation on reproductive choices. " If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament."-Florence Kennedy (Hightower-Langston 24) Beyond insisting on the right to legalize abortion, feminists often raise the argument that the reason this political and/or moral issue over a women's body is so controversial and often neglected is because it is an issue concerning the secondary sex. Also, because these high institutions of power are dominated by men who cannot identify with pregnancy and child responsibility, there is no possible way they can connect to the issue; nor should they have a say. Most feminists agree that abortion is as an issue for the woman on each individual basis, and that women should have the medical right and choice to own her body. This is yet another demonstration of the man's powerful voice, leaving women oppressed in their own skin.

I feel that liberal feminism can apply to the everyday experiences of everyday women from all racial, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. This particular ideology reinforces the idea of equality between the sexes, which is something quite hard to argue with. Although, some feminists feel this ideology has distinct flaws to be noted. Oftentimes liberal feminism is critiqued to be too promoting of gender sameness and gender neutrality. Females should celebrate the positive aspects of being a woman, such as being empathetic and sensitive. Yet, liberal feminism never encourages a loss of femininity or gaining more masculine qualities. Other accusations revolve around too much emphasis placed on economic inequality-as income should not be the most meaningful aspect of a woman's life. This is hopefully true for most people, but we live in a capitalist society, and this argument

can be applied to any working person. Also, liberal ideals tend to neglect more serious womanly issues such as domestic violence and rape. This is a valid argument, as liberalism does not really touch on violence faced by females as a whole-although it does not promote any kind of violence either. An opinion posed about making the American working environment and home life more of a hybrid has also been scrutinized. " The more common focus of contemporary critiques of women's equality has moved from adults to children. According to this argument, women's workplace commitments may appeal to adults, but they pose dangers for the young. The concern over 'neglected' or 'latchkey' children has insidious overtones, implying maternal indifference and fueling a moral panic over the transformation in women's lives." (Godbey 1993) This passage identifies with the concern of child neglect and loss of motherhood given to young children. A concern raised about parenting sources only reiterates the promotion of shared responsibility between the two individuals. Research has also proven that having a working mother gives a young person a perspective about working mothers, and a positive example of a hard-working female. And, just because a mother is a homemaker, doesn't necessarily mean she spends more quality time with her children, as she has to maintain a house by herself. Although many relevant arguments and critiques about liberal feminism can be posed, little social negativity can be proved to be illogical or unattainable in any regard.

" The day will come when men will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the race."-Susan B. Anthony (feminist.



com) Susan B. Anthony said it best, and the ideologies that support this statement can be traced back to the fundamentals of liberal feminism at its best. Because the liberal form of feminist ideology can be applied to women in the masses, men, and everyday lifestyles, it can be activated into a reality and not live just in theory. Regardless of class, race, socio-economic standing, this theory can be applied to almost anyone. Although each and every feminist ideology has its own role in the feminist movement, this important and vital attribute of being able to appeal to so many people sets it aside from any other ideology. The heart of feminism strives for equality and the liberal feminist belief system supports this basic, yet powerful notion of gender neutrality through sexual equality.